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Telephone Interview with President Gerald R. Ford
January 24, 2002

Mieczkowski:

Jim Cannon mentioned to me that you were planning a program to double the size of the national park system. I was wondering what other bold innovative initiatives you had in mind for a full term as president, besides, for example, doubling the national park system?

Ford:

Well, I always felt that we had to do something about Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid. There was no question that down the road there would be a financing problem in all three cases and that in the meantime there were questions about the adequacy of benefits, et cetera. So there was no question, those three programs something had to be done between the White House and the Congress.

Mieczkowski:

Was Vice President Rockerfeller's proposal for an Energy Independence Authority an initiative that you wanted to follow through on in a full term?

Ford:

Potentially, yes, but not specifically because there had been some developments following his proposal that indicated that the energy problem was being resolved by other means. So the urgency of his--what was it?--one hundred billion dollars, was not quite as serious.

Mieczkowski:

I noted that there are a number of high profile administration members who opposed the Energy Independence Authority, Alan Greenspan, Bill Simon, Don Rumsfeld. I was wondering why you supported it, enough to announce it, anyways?

Ford:

For two good reasons. One, I wanted to show my loyalty and sympathy to the vice president. Secondly, it was a way of highlighting the urgency of doing something in the energy field.

Mieczkowski:

It lost a lot of steams shortly after you supported it. Were you inclined to abandon it shortly after you unveiled that idea?

Ford:

We didn't abandon it, but with the opposition that developed not only within the White House staff but in the Congress, it was obvious that the program was not going to materialize.

Mieczkowski:



I had a question about your press imagery. I am supposed to meet with Ron Nesson next week, actually, and it seems to me that unfortunately press and comedians did not give you enough credit for your athletic prowess and instead used the occasional stumbles--which can happen to anybody--as a reason to portray you as a klutz. And I can only imagine how much that must have hurt you to see those types of portrayals. I was wondering if you could talk about how these portrayals bothered you, hurt you, or detracted from public respect toward you or even toward the presidency.

Ford:

It didn't bother me as much as the press indicated. Anyone who competed in college athletics, football particularly, got used to what the sports writers wrote and they were a lot more hard-nosed than even the White House people. So although it bothered me, it didn't affect my attitude on substantive matters or the operations in the White House.

Mieczkowski:

Was your family upset, was Betty or your children upset with these portrayals?

Ford:

You would have to ask them. They never complained to me so I assumed that it didn't bother them. Now, they may have resented it personally, but they never if so expressed their antagonism to me.

Mieczkowski:

Were you upset with Ron Nesson's appearance on "Saturday Night Live," which apparently did not work as an antidote to the press portrayals?

Ford:

That didn't bother me. I think I wish in retrospect he hadn't done it, but it wasn't a major problem.

Mieczkowski:

I am also interested with your relationships with the right wing of the Republican Party. As president, did you feel a sense of frustration that after a quarter century's loyal work for the G.O.P., the right wing seemed to be resisting your leadership?

Ford:

Well, that was exemplified in their support for Reagan when he challenged me. I had hoped that Reagan would not challenge me in the Republican convention. When he told me he was going to be a candidate I was disappointed. And I felt badly when some of the extreme right wing people became so vigorous in some of the primaries like North Carolina that resulted in my having to campaign for the nomination when I should have been campaigning totally for the presidency against the Democrats.



Mieczkowski:

Can you point to any policies that you modified in order to put the right wing more at ease or to gain their support?

Ford:

I don't recall any major program that I modified or changed based on their composition.

Mieczkowski:

Was your selection of Bob Dole as a running mate part of a strategy perhaps to bring the conservative wing a little more firmly into your camp?

Ford:

That was a factor. But the major factor was we knew we had to carry the western states unanimously to win, and someone like Bob Dole was by far the better candidate for that purpose. And if you look at the map of this election, Ford/Dole carried every state west of the Mississippi except Minnesota and Texas.

Mieczkowski:

Yes, I think he helped you in the Midwest.

Ford:

And that was our way of offsetting Carter's support in the South.

Mieczkowski:

Obviously, the Reagan challenges you mentioned hurt. It doesn't seem that you and Reagan had the warmest of personal relationships. Were you surprised in 1980 when Reagan asked you to be his running mate? Did that come out of the blue?

Ford:

Came out of the blue as far as I was concerned, when he came to our suite in Detroit, when the convention was there and made that suggestion. It was a big surprise.

Mieczkowski:

Were there any conservative senators or congressman whom you felt were especially supportive of you and your policies?

Ford:

While I was in the White House?

Mieczkowski:

Yes.

Ford:



I always had--among the rank and file of the Republicans--I always had good support both in the House and the Senate. Our problem was the Democrats outnumbered our congressional people about two-to-one.

Mieczkowski:

Could I ask the converse of that question: Were there any Republican congressman who were particularly unhelpful or antagonistic toward you?

Ford:

Thirty years ago I can't recall anybody by name, no.

Mieczkowski:

Historian John Robert Greene, in his book, The Presidency of Gerald Ford, on your presidency. There is one point in which he discusses your giving aid to New York City and he describes it as a flip-flop, in which you decided to help the Big Apple partly in order to win support of conservative New York Senator William Buckley, in light of the New York primary that was coming up. Was that a consideration at all? Is he accurate in that speculation?

Ford:

No. The reason I was adamantly opposed to just a hand-out to New York City, which was what Mayor Beame and Governor Carey wanted me to do. You see, the problem was New York had a bad policy of paying too much in pensions, paying too much in salaries to New York City employees. And the City was going bankrupt because of this irresponsible fiscal policy. And I was not, as president, going to bail them out unless they took corrective action. And I said if you straighten out your pension problems and your pay problems, we'll find a way to help you. And that result was, we devised this program based on their corrective action on pensions and wages. We agreed to loan them money at the beginning of their fiscal year, when they needed the cash, in return for them to pay us back as they collected their city taxes. And that result was the federal government actually made money because we charged them interest on the money we loaned them.

Mieczkowski:

So the New York primary wasn't really that great a consideration?

Ford:

No, no. It was a purely a fiscal matter involving their irresponsible pension and wage policy.

Mieczkowski:

In the book manuscript that I recently finished I described your attempts to resist Congressional encroachments on executive authority, which was a 1970s post-Watergate problem, and I discussed your veto strategy at length. What other tactics are you proud of that allowed you to resist congressional authority or assert your power over Capitol Hill?



Ford:

Well, as I recall I vetoed a very high percentage of their budget recommendations, their appropriation bills. I don't recall any other major area. Tackling the Congress on fiscal vetoes was not an easy matter and that's where I concentrated my effort to deal more strongly with the Congress.

Mieczkowski:

Speaking of your congressional relations, I met with Max Friedersdorf last summer, and he mentioned to me that he thought your honeymoon Congress would have ended even without the Nixon pardon because the 1974 midterm election would have stirred up partisanship regardless. He even thinks your honeymoon ended before the pardon. Do you agree, or do you think that that election year in 1974 doomed your honeymoon to end soon?

Ford:

Well, we took a terrible clobbering in those elections. Democrats ended up with better than a two-to-one margin in both the House and the Senate. So obviously that was the end of the honeymoon.

Mieczkowski:

Do you think your campaigning for congressional candidates in 1974 hurt your position politically?

Ford:

No, I think the politicians understood that it was my obligation, if I wanted more Republicans, to get out and campaign. I don't think it had an adverse impact, no.

Mieczkowski:

Your administration was very frustrated by how slow the new Congress was to act. Did you expect it to act slowly given the large number of new members, the need to form new committees, reorganize and such?

Ford:

I understood, having been in the Congress 25 years, I understood that it did take time to get squared away.

Mieczkowski:

I wanted to ask about your philosophy on getting along with political adversaries because I've been greatly impressed with your ability to be personal friends with Democrats, like Tip O'Neil, to put aside political differences after a vote. I've quoted you as saying that you need to disagree without being disagreeable, that you have many adversaries but not a single enemy in the House. I was wondering if you could express a philosophy on getting along with political adversaries.

Ford:



Well, all my political life I have believed that when you're in office you have an obligation to get things done, and you can't get things done if you just are an extremist and refuse to work out a solution. So, whenever a problem arose, even though I might have a disagreement with a Democrat or another Republican, I was always looking for a way for us to resolve the difference and to get the problem solved. And that was my philosophy from the very first when I got into politics, and I still think it's the right way.

Mieczkowski:

I have one chapter of my book devoted to your "Whip Inflation Now" program, and I've interviewed Russell Freeburg twice. And I've read in some interviews, in fact when I spoke with you once seven years ago you mentioned that WIN did some good. I was wondering if you could elaborate on some of the beneficial effects of WIN that you witnessed as president?

Ford:

There's no question when I became president inflation was a major economic problem. As I recall, it was about 10 percent, in that range. And that kind of inflation is devastating to your economic situation in the country. By initiating the WIN program, I at least convinced a lot of Americans that they had to do something about inflation, or the government had to do something. So, it was criticized by a lot of people, but it had certainly a beneficial impact; how much I can't quantify.

Mieczkowski:

Russ Freeburg mentioned to me that Bill Simon reportedly wanted to become WIN director. Do you recall Simon ever approaching you about his?

Ford:

No, not to my knowledge.

Mieczkowski:

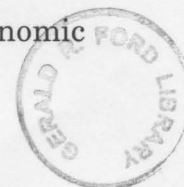
Simon seems to have been one of the more contentious members of your administration. And I've noted that there were lots of reports in early 1975 that you were getting ready to fire him for not supporting administration policies. His view seemed very rigidly conservative, uncompromising. Why did you decide to keeping him on board or did you ever consider letting him go?

Ford:

I never considered letting him go. I understood where he had opposite views, but I always admired him because once I made a decision, even though he objected, he was a good team player and supported it. So there was no reason for me to make a change.

Mieczkowski:

Was he==or who among your advisors did you feel had the closest economic and fiscal philosophy, closest to your own?



Ford:

Alan Greenspan, chairman of my economic policy group, was the one that I felt closest to.

Mieczkowski:

His views were most simpatico with your own?

Ford:

Right.

Mieczkowski:

Russ Freeburg also mentioned to me that when he was in the administration in August 1974 there were lots of rumors at the White House that Nixon was on the verge of suicide and that that may have influenced your decision to pardon him. Did you hear reports about Nixon being close to suicide and did that influence your thinking?

Ford:

It had no impact whatsoever. I never heard that rumor.

Mieczkowski:

In David Gergen's recent book on presidential leadership he expressed some dissatisfaction with the speechwriting process in your administration, saying that lots of time was wasted going over speeches page by page in the Oval Office. And some administration members whom I've spoken to complained in the same way. Were you dissatisfied with your speechwriting team or the speechwriting process?

Ford:

I thought Bob Hartmann was a first class speechwriter. I liked his style; he seemed to have a knack of using verbs and phrases compatible with my own views. No, Bob Hartmann was a first class speechwriter, and I've always said he did a great job.

Mieczkowski:

So you were happy with your writers as well as the process?

Ford:

Oh, yes.

Mieczkowski:

I just have one question left for you, President Ford. I've tried to end interviews with your administration members by asking what were the times that they saw President Ford happiest, most unhappy, and third, downright angriest. I was wondering if you could recount those three emotions for me while you were in the White House?

Ford:



Well, the programs that made me the happiest, in domestic, was the success we had in turning the economy around. When I became president in 74' we had a disastrous economic recession, and by the time of mid-1976 we had turned the economy around and we were well on the road to a period of prosperity. Domestically, that was the happiest thing. In foreign policy, the thing that made me happiest was my participation in and support of the Helsinki Accords. There were many people who disagreed with my willingness to sit down with 34 other heads of state. But it was the right thing to do, and I think in retrospect now, most objective critics will agree that the Helsinki Accords was the spark plug that brought about the demise of the Soviet Union.

Mieczkowski:
Unhappiest and angriest as president.

Ford:
Well, I don't think I recall at this point any major problems. I got sort of upset with myself with the comment I made in the second debate about Poland. My idea was right and it turned out that I was correct that the Polish people threw the Soviets out, or the Russians out, but I didn't explain it very well, and I was angry with myself.

Mieczkowski:
I tell my students that you were about fifteen years too early with that.

Ford:
Okay, one more question.

Mieczkowski:
What about the angriest moment in your presidency? With your staff or with politicians?

Ford:
I was angriest with some of the tactics of the challenges to me in the Republican convention. I thought it was a mistake from their point of view, a mistake from the point of view of the party, because it diverted a lot of my time and attention, and I should have been campaigning against Jimmy Carter.

Mieczkowski:
That's very understandable and those challenges are always divisive to a party.

Ford:
Right.

