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GERALD FORD INTERVIEW
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GERALD FORD
38th U.S. President
Interviewed by Hugh Sidey
Interview Date: 10/22/1996
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START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:

The American President
Kunhardt Film Foundation

ON SCREEN TEXT:

Gerald Ford
38th U.S. President

Gerald Ford

38th U.S. President

00:00:17:00

HUGH SIDEY

Mr. President, as you know, we talk here basically about how you came into the presidency and the background and what prepared you.

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TEXT ON SCREEN:

Hugh Sidey

Journalist

HUGH SIDEY

One of the things I noticed is that you never hungered for the White House, you entered politics without a great ambition to go right to the White House. Why?

GERALD FORD

So, my whole political ambition, after a term or two in the House of Representatives, was to be the Speaker and handle that gavel up there in front of all 434 other members.

HUGH SIDEY

You didn't get Potomac fever right off... how... that idea that you wanted to go down to the White House where the big action is.

GERALD FORD

No no. No, I had really never any ambition to get into the executive branch, either as vice president or president. My ambition was focused, ninety-nine percent, on trying to be Speaker of the House.

00:01:15:00

HUGH SIDEY

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You know, there's a picture in your book, your memoir as being president, that shows a House session. And there you are, and Richard Nixon, and Lyndon Johnson. All three would become president. Did you have any inkling back there that any of those people were on the way?

GERALD FORD

None, what so ever. Hugh, I first met Dick Nixon the day I was sworn in, first year... January 1949 I had just taken the oath of office along with all the other freshmen. And this man walked up to me and he said, "I'm Dick Nixon from California. I welcome you here in the House Chamber. That was January of '49.

HUGH SIDEY

That was the start, huh, that long relationship? Realistically, when you'd been in Congress for a while, did you see a chance to be Speaker? Did you think there would be a political change of that nature?

GERALD FORD

I must have subjectively thought that. I was very lucky I got a superb committee assignment by pure happenstance my first year. I was first put on the committee on Public Works, and I was the most junior member of the minority. That's way down the line. It was the committee on Public Works, but fortunately it had jurisdiction over the White House. And President Truman moved out of the White House because it was falling down. Literally

falling down. And so our committee had to pass judgment on whether it should be torn down entirely and rebuilt, whether the walls on the outside should be retained and the inside gutted. So, Mr. Truman had our committee down to the White House in 1950, and we got a personal tour. And it was interesting. He pointed out how the ceiling in the East Room, it was 18 inches fallen.

00:03:34:00

GERALD FORD

He showed us into the bathrooms and they were ancient. He pointed out there wasn't a single built-in closet. That was my first experience in the White House.

HUGH SIDEY

Now you begin to meet presidents, of course, in your congressional role. What'd you think of Truman?

GERALD FORD

Well, he was one of my favorites. Particularly in foreign policy. I admired his strong action in meeting the communist aggression in South Korea. I favored his decision to proceed with the nuclear bomb program. I applauded his action to end the war in the Pacific with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And I strongly supported his Marshall Plan because it was important that we move ahead to rebuild Western Europe and not make the same mistake we did after

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World War I.

00:04:41:00

HUGH SIDEY

What'd you think of Ike?

GERALD FORD

Well, I was among the Republicans in the House who signed a letter to Ike, I think there were twenty of us, so we urged him to come back and run for president. And that was not very popular back in my Michigan congressional district.

HUGH SIDEY

Back with Bob Taft's country, eh?

GERALD FORD

That was Taft country. I think Ike did a fine job as president. As a matter of fact, when I became president... A president has the prerogative of having three portraits in the cabinet room of former presidents. I picked Abraham Lincoln, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Harry Truman.

HUGH SIDEY

I see. You had a Democrat right in there. How about your feeling about Kennedy? Now, did you know him in the House when he was in the Senate?

GERALD FORD

I... by pure happenstance, Hugh, I got to know Jack Kennedy very well. So when I was assigned an office, I was over in what was then called the old house office building. By luck, my office was right across the corridor from Jack Kennedy's and right next to Lloyd Bentsen's. So very often, for the next four years, I would walk back and forth to the House chamber, when a vote came up, with Jack Kennedy. We'd walk into the House chamber and he'd go on the Democratic side and I'd walk on the Republican side. But our friendship became, I would say, very warm and very enduring. And that friendship made it very difficult when I was subsequently made a member of the Warren Commission and had to analyze the facts about his assassination in 1963.

HUGH SIDEY

Tell me a little bit about that because you weren't that enthusiastic about being on the commission. Were you at first?

GERALD FORD

No, I was, of course, very saddened about his death because of my long standing friendship, but on a Sunday night, right after the assassination, I got a call from Lyndon Johnson. And he said, "Congressman, I want to appoint you as the House member representing the Republicans to investigate the assassination.

00:07:18:00

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GERALD FORD

But he said, "I want you as the Republican." I said, "Mr. President, I've got all of these duties on the committee on appropriations and so forth and so on and... Well you know Lyndon, he just twisted my arm. And I said ok.

HUGH SIDEY

Yeah. Well you're glad you did it, though.

GERALD FORD

Oh, I'm very glad I did it. And I feel very strongly that our decisions... The two basic decisions, Hugh, number one that Lee Harvey Oswald committed the assassination and our committee, or the Warren Commission, found no evidence of a conspiracy, foreign or domestic. Now Oliver Stone and all the people trying to make a buck out of the tragedy, in my opinion, have not come up with any new evidence. They simply have distorted the facts. They've come up with, in my opinion, unsound decisions. The basic conclusions are the same: Oswald did it and there was no conspiracy.

HUGH SIDEY

What's you think of Lyndon Johnson as a legislator and as a president? Did you get along with him?

GERALD FORD

Well as a legislator he was about one of the best. He knew how to make

coalitions, he knew how to manipulate, he knew the rules. From a legislating point of view, Lyndon Johnson was a very very skilled member of the congress. He was tough personally. He was very on me, said some unkind statements, but basically he was a good decent tough guy. I'll never forget, after all these unkind statements he said about me in the congress... Just before he left Washington, he called me down to the White House. I didn't know why. And he spent about an hour reminiscing about things that we had argued about to problems we had. He couldn't quite come to say he was sorry. But he was certainly friendly and I admired him as a technician, and certainly he was a dedicated patriotic American.

HUGH SIDEY

Well as you know he had unkind things to say about almost everybody in private you always figured that. Now you were a bit of a rebel in the House. You were the man that... there were the young bucks that put you in charge and threw Charlie Halleck, the minority leader out. Why?

00:10:06:00

GERALD FORD:

Well, after the Goldwater debacle in 1964, the Republicans lost forty-five House seats. We went from one hundred and eighty-seven down to one hundred and forty. And the younger members on the Republican side said, "We have to make a change in our leadership." Charlie Halleck was a fine person, but he represented the old guard.

HUGH SIDEY

He was known as the gut fighter.

GERALD FORD

He was a hard nose gut fighter. But the younger members who survived the Goldwater debacle said we need new leadership, so they picked me to be their candidate and I won by the landslide margin of, I think it was eighty-three to seventy-seven.

HUGH SIDEY

That's all you need.

GERALD FORD

Or seventy-three to sixty-seven, whatever it was.

HUGH SIDEY

I see. Now we have the rise of Richard Nixon, your friend. And finally in the White House. And then the advent of Watergate. Did you see at the start of that what might transpire? The very fact that Nixon might be trapped in this and be forced out of the White House?

GERALD FORD

I was dumbfounded by the stupidity of the Watergate break in. And on the Monday following that break in, I think it was Saturday night, I had a meeting

with John Mitchell who was then in charge of Nixon's campaign. He initially had been Nixon's attorney general, but he resigned to run Nixon's campaign in 1972. Well, I said to John Mitchell: "Did the president, did the White House, did you know anything about this stupid break in?" And John Mitchell looked me right in the eye and said, "Absolutely not." So on that assurance from a former attorney general, I took the firm stand that it was not a White House conceived or executed operation. It, of course as it turned out when the tapes were revealed, Nixon had some knowledge and he certainly, by his comments and actions, participated in the obstruction of justice.

HUGH SIDEY

You stayed pretty loyal to him and somebody in that times I remember quoted you as saying you don't tackle your quarterback or you don't get rid of him. You- you stayed pretty close til the end.

00:12:59:00

GERALD FORD

Well, after all I was vice president based on his nomination. I was assured by him, as well as by John Mitchell, that he, Nixon, had no involvement. So, I felt I was being told the truth. And it was a very narrow path, Hugh, for nine months. If I was critical of Nixon, the press and the public would have said, "Well, he's trying to undercut Nixon so he'll get the job." On the other hand, if I'd stayed too loyal, it might appear that I was supporting somebody who was involved in this very unwise action. So, I had to go down this narrow path of not supporting him too much or not criticizing him too frequently. It was not

a pleasant experience.

HUGH SIDEY

When'd you get the first whiff that Spiro Agnew was in trouble?

GERALD FORD

Well, that's an interesting story. About two days, maybe one day, before the story broke, Nixon invited me to come down to his executive office in the old executive office building. I had no reason to know why I was being called...

HUGH SIDEY

You were minority leader.

GERALD FORD

I was minority leader. He asked me to come down there, and for an hour and a half, we sat there and talked very informally, reminisced about our long friendship. We... It was a strange conversation. I finally got a call to come to the floor of the House. Immediately, there was a vote. So I left. I got on the floor and two or three of my colleagues on my Republican side grabbed me and said, "Agnew is resigning! Agnew is resigning!" That was the first real knowledge I had that he had taken that action.

HUGH SIDEY

But now... wasn't there a little clue there that you might be in line here? At least to be investigated as a possibility...

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GERALD FORD

Well that meeting that I just described must have been...

HUGH SIDEY

Yeah. That was the interview.

GERALD FORD

... a planned affair by Nixon. He wanted to take a look at me, wanted to talk to me about policy and so forth.

HUGH SIDEY

But I... but you must have had a clue that perhaps you were in line. At least to be one... one to be considered.

00:15:44:00

GERALD FORD

That night. That night I was home with Betty, and about 8:30 after dinner I got a call from Mel Laird. And Mel Laird said, "I'm down at the White House. Would you accept the nomination for vice president if it was offered?" I said, "I guess I would."

HUGH SIDEY

Did you have any doubts, though?

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GERALD FORD

Oh, no. No. I knew if I was offered it, I would accept it, but...

HUGH SIDEY

Why? With all the stories about how worthless the job was and Lyndon Johnson was so unhappy and it didn't...

GERALD FORD

Well that's interesting because after five times trying to be Speaker...

HUGH SIDEY

I see.

GERALD FORD

I had never gotten enough Republican members to become Speaker. So Betty and I, in January of 1973 had decided I'd run for the House one more time and then retire. That would have filled out twenty-eight years. So, going to the vice presidency for two more years would have fulfilled twenty-eight years and would have given me a little prestige as a retiring vice president. I never thought being vice president would lead to being president.

HUGH SIDEY

I see. You were, however, plowing new ground here. You were, still are, the

only vice president to be appointed mid-term by a president under the new law.

GERALD FORD

I was the first one under the 25th amendment, but I later appointed Nelson Rockefeller. So he was the second.

HUGH SIDEY

What was good about being vice president as you look back?

GERALD FORD

It was, to a degree, a training ground for president, although, having been the Republican leader for ten years— or nine and a half years— I had good exposure to presidents, to presidential problems. So, the combination of minority leader and vice president made me highly qualified to assume the presidency when Nixon resigned.

HUGH SIDEY

Just after you became vice president, Archibald Cox, the special prosecutor was fired, watergate became very heated, there was impeachment talk of Richard Nixon. It looked like you were really in the fire. How did you feel about those days?

00:18:29:00

GERALD FORD

It was very very uncomfortable. I disagreed privately with some of the actions that were taken by the Nixon White House. I never had good relations with Haldeman and Ehrlichman and Chuck Colson. My personality— My background didn't fit with them. So, I felt that President Nixon was getting some bad advice and therefore I was very uncomfortable.

HUGH SIDEY

Say, did you have an inkling at the start that this thing might go the full distance and Nixon be forced out and you be president? When did that thought first occur to you?

GERALD FORD

Well number one, I hoped it would not take place because President Nixon was a long time friend of mine. I had great respect for him. I had been assured he wasn't involved in the Watergate by him as well as by John Mitchell. So, I never expected it to happen.

HUGH SIDEY

Even then? Even with the storm brewing there?

GERALD FORD

Well as things unraveled, it became more and more possible. But I still relied on the assurances given to me. And I continued to hope that President Nixon's decisions would be the ones that I knew he had made over the years, and

were good and would not be involved in the advice that he got from people like Haldemen and Ehrlichman and Chuck Colson.

HUGH SIDEY

Then you got the fateful call from Al Haig that told you there was, what we call a smoking gun. There was evidence that Nixon was involved.

GERALD FORD

That was a call that Al Haig made asking to come over and see me to tell me—I think this was on a Friday afternoon—that there would be a new tape release on Monday. And he said the evidence in there was devastating and that there would probably be an impeachment or a resignation. And he laid out five or six of the options that he said might take place. And he said, “I’m just warning you that you’ve got to be prepared that things might change dramatically and you could become president.”

HUGH SIDEY

Did this bother you? What did you think inside?

00:21:12:00

GERALD FORD

Well, I was shocked and saddened because I had hoped that kind of development would not take place. But according to Al Haig in his description of the evidence that was coming on that tape, it was perfectly clear to me that Nixon either was going to face impeachment in the House and probably

conviction in the Senate, or he would be forced to resign.

HUGH SIDEY

So, therefore, you faced the prospect right then that you would be president of the United States. The possibility.

GERALD FORD

There's an interesting story. Betty had planned to go to New York on the following Monday to pick out some new interior things for the vice president residence, which we were to take over from the Navy. Well, when I came home that Friday— she was making plans to go to New York on Monday and I said, "Betty, I think you better change your plans because the odds, overwhelmingly, are such I don't think we're ever going to live in the vice president's house. So she had to make up some story that things had changed and she couldn't go. But that was a dramatic night in our lives because for the first time, we literally talked about what a significant change it would be in our lives to go from living out there in the house in Alexandria to living in the White House.

HUGH SIDEY

But you weren't afraid of the presidency.

GERALD FORD

Not in any way whatsoever, Hugh. I figured my twenty-five and a half years in the House, the committees I served on, which gave me the highest access to

foreign policy and defense decisions, my nine and a half years as Republican leader where I was involved in White House meetings over the years gave me unquestioned preparation to become president without any problems.

HUGH SIDEY

But a lot of people suggest you were dealt a pretty tough hand. Scandal, the Watergate of course. The end of Vietnam, you could see the collapse coming. Inflation. Recession. That's a pretty tough time.

GERALD FORD

We had a full platter on my desk in the Oval Office. You're right. We had Watergate, we had the serious problems of what was happening in Vietnam, we inherited the worst economic recession in post war period, inflation was high, interest rates were high, unemployment was growing. We had a prospective meeting with Mr. Brezhnev in Vladivostok to negotiate arms reduction in the nuclear area. We had not only domestic problems, which were very serious, but we had challenges from abroad.

00:24:38:00

GERALD FORD

Our allies weren't sure what a new president would do in these circumstances.

HUGH SIDEY

[Interrupts]

Who's Gerry Ford, huh?

GERALD FORD

And we were apprehensive that maybe our enemies— our adversaries would try to take advantage of this change in US leadership.

HUGH SIDEY

Back up just a bit here and tell me about August 9th. You're told you're going to be president. You have to go— That Nixon's going to resign. You have to go see him and escort him out of the White House. What's you think?

GERALD FORD

That was pretty sad, Hugh. Very sad because of our long personal friendship with Dick and Pat but...

HUGH SIDEY

What do you tell him?

GERALD FORD

We went down to the White House and tried to be cordial. But what can you say in that kind of circumstance except to thank them for their service to the country over a long period of time and wish them well? It was a difficult 25 or 30 minutes that we had in the White House and walking out to the helicopter. That's a sad situation when you see a couple that had been good friends going and leaving under those very tragic circumstances.

HUGH SIDEY

What's the first thing you did when you turned away and went back into the White House? Your White House now.

GERALD FORD

I squeezed my wife's hand and said, "We'll do our best."

HUGH SIDEY

Where'd you go? Did you go to the office?

GERALD FORD

Well, I think we went up to the Oval Office, as I recall. Our children were there, and I had, almost immediately, the responsibility of going into the East Room— I'm sure you remember that— where I had to be sworn in and where I had to make an acceptance speech. And I couldn't prepare my speech until 24 hours or less beforehand because, up until the last minute, Hugh, we weren't sure what President Nixon was going to do. And I had a wonderful speech writer, Bob Hartmann, who went home the night before who stayed up until 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning and wrote this speech. He came in to see me at 8 o'clock in my office as vice president and he handed me the copy and I read it. He had a knack of saying what I would say. I came to one sentence, I said, "Bob, we ought to strike this." And it was the sentence: "our long national nightmare is over." And Bob Hartmann said to me, "If you strike

that I'm quitting."

[laughter]

GERALD FORD

So I left it in and it turned out to be the most memorable line in my remarks and it was a wonderful line.

HUGH SIDEY

I see. Ok, you're president now. Uh, probably the first thing that happened—or big thing that happened was the pardon. Nixon pardon. Describe that to me a little bit because here is a country that's really crying for retribution against a president they feel has violated the trust. You're in the spot, and yet one day you decide to do that.

00:28:31:00

GERALD FORD

Well let me take just a minute to give you the background. In the first roughly twenty-eight days I was in the White House, I spent at least twenty-five percent of my time listening to the lawyers from the White House or the lawyers from the Department of Justice... Taking my time on what I should do about Mr. Nixon's papers, Mr. Nixon's tapes. At the same time, [29:07] **I was struggling with serious economic problems were plaguing the country.** High inflation, high interest rates, growing unemployment, a serious recession right over the brink. We had international problems with the Soviet

Union and our allies were apprehensive. So I had a full platter of problems involving 230 million American people. Then I went to a press conference, my first press conference, and I thought I would be asked questions about the economy, about international affairs. Ninety percent of those questions were from the White House press, “What are you going to do about Mr. Nixon’s tapes, Mr. Nixon’s papers?” As I walked back to the Oval Office, I said to myself, “I’ve gotta get rid of that problem. How can I do it as quickly as possible?” I talked to Phil Bucen, my counsel, and I said, “Can I pardon him?” And he took a day or two to look at the options. He came back and said, “Yes.” And I decided that was the only way I could get rid of Mr. Nixon’s problems that were taking 25 percent of my daily time, so I could spend 100 percent of my time on the problems of 230 million Americans.

HUGH SIDEY

You never felt manipulated?

00:30:44:00

GERALD FORD

No. None whatsoever. I made the sole decision— And I have to say, most of my staff disagreed with me, but I was absolutely convinced that it was the right thing to do. And I’m even more convinced today, Hugh, twenty years later.

HUGH SIDEY

Now, you told me a story about calling up Tip O’Neill, Speaker of the House, to

tell him about that. He was playing golf on- at Burning Tree. What did he tell you? Tell that story.

GERALD FORD

Well I can't recall the precise words, but he said it was a dumb mistake and it would hurt me politically.

HUGH SIDEY

But you'd lose the election, as I remember, yeah.

GERALD FORD

I said, " Well Tip, I'm doing what I think is right." And I felt strongly then and I feel equally strongly today.

HUGH SIDEY

Now did you see Nixon at all after this? What was your relationship with him as he kind of went into seclusion?

GERALD FORD

I went to California about a month after Nixon's left the White House, and as you may remember, he had a serious phlebitis problem. He was in a hospital in California and as a matter of courtesy, I went to the hospital and saw him. He almost died on that occasion. He had all the tubes in his mouth and his nose. I never saw anybody closer to death and still alive than Dick Nixon was

at that time.

HUGH SIDEY

And you went to his funeral.

GERALD FORD

I went to his funeral along with others.

HUGH SIDEY

And your feelings?

GERALD FORD

Yes, he was a long time friend who made a very stupid mistake. So I have to look at the overall, which I think was a good record and... can see that everybody's human and you can make mistakes that are very unfortunate and regrettable.

HUGH SIDEY

Did you feel at a disadvantage? Because you were really never elected. You weren't elected vice president and you were never elected president. Did that weaken you at all?

GERALD FORD

I didn't think so. After all, I got a very strong vote by Democrats in the House

and Senate when I was nominated. It would have been helpful to have won in 1976 so any apprehension about an appointed person would've been wiped out. But we lost that election. Very close. And as I recall if we'd gotten six thousand more votes in Ohio and two thousand more in Hawaii, we would've won.

HUGH SIDEY

How did you deal with the criticism when you got in the presidency? Because, as you know, any president is subject to just as horrendous criticism. Number one, you'd come in in this unusual way, you were viewed in various critical manner. How'd you deal with it?

00:33:55:00

GERALD FORD

Well, I had learned a long time ago when I competed in athletics, sports writers are tougher than even the White House press are. So having played football and coached football, I had developed an understanding of criticism by the news media. You can't let criticism, either by the public or the news media, upset you mentally or otherwise. If you are right and think you're right, the criticism ought to roll off your shoulders without any bother. Now the only time I got upset was when there would be criticism I thought unfairly of our children and my wife Betty. Now that really irritated me.

HUGH SIDEY

Didn't bother you on your golf game or anything like that.

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GERALD FORD

Oh no no no no. I used to laugh at that, and of course, Bob Hope over the years has made a bit of money making jokes about my golf game...

HUGH SIDEY

Chevy Chase about your falling down.

GERALD FORD

Bob Hope says I'm the only president that can play four golf courses simultaneously, and calls me the hitman of the PGA.

HUGH SIDEY

I see. We come up to Vietnam and amnesty. The partial amnesty that you granted. Now again, very controversial. What do you do with those kids? Why'd you do that?

GERALD FORD

Well I felt that this whole group of our younger generation had made what they thought was a conscientious decision to either refuse to serve or to flee to get out of going in the military. And in order to heal the land, it was important— with Watergate and the war and Vietnam, our country, Hugh, was torn apart. People had lost faith in the government, they lost faith in the White House. The American people were yelling and screaming at each other. And if I as president could any way bring about a healing I thought it was a

step in the right direction. And as offering amnesty to this group, I thought was a constructive step to bring them back into being a part of our society. It was a good program. It worked. It gave those individuals an opportunity to earn the right having their record corrected.

HUGH SIDEY

Now, the end of Vietnam came on your watch, Mr. President.

GERALD FORD

It sure did.

HUGH SIDEY

Was there much you could do? Or were you just an observer in that period?

00:37:05:00

GERALD FORD

I was not an observer. I thought we had an obligation to do our very best to carry out the negotiated settlement that Secretary Kissinger had achieved in January of 1943. The Paris Accords. Of course the North Vietnamese never lived up to these agreements. And because our congress refused to give adequate military aid, our South Vietnamese allies had inadequate military equipment to fight the North Vietnamese. And so, North Vietnamese overran South Vietnam and were right on the outskirts of Saigon, and that's where the crunch came.

HUGH SIDEY

Yeah.

GERALD FORD

And at that point, because Congress lost its guts and wouldn't put the money up to help our allies, we were faced with a critical situation of how we could evacuate all of the Americans from Saigon. And as many as our South Vietnamese friends who had fought with us and stayed with us as possible, we had some disputes. Secretary Schlesinger was most anxious to get all of the Americans out, but he delayed in some of the evacuation programs about getting some of the South Vietnamese out. At the same time, I had an ambassador in Saigon named Martin who wanted to stay until the last— evacuate everybody including US people- personnel as well as South Vietnamese. So, I was pulled both ways and I felt to the very end we should evacuate as many of our allied South Vietnamese as possible. And then that result was we did a good job. And we not only got all of our Americans out, but we got a significant number of South Vietnamese who had been staunch allies during the war in Vietnam.

HUGH SIDEY

On the Mayaguez affair, the kidnapping of those Americans who were released— expropriating of that ship over in the South China Sea. Uh, that's a kind of a classic case of decision making in which there wasn't enough information and... tell me a little about that. How you faced that.

GERALD FORD

Well, first I was awakened about 5 am by Brent Scowcroft, who was the head of my national security council, and— telling me that there were radio reports that an American merchant ship had been seized in international waters. I called an NSC meeting, I think, at 8 o'clock that morning. By that time we had some official confirmation. It had been seized by the Cambodians...

00:40:25:00

GERALD FORD

... And was being taken to one of their harbors. I decided we could not tolerate that obvious violation of international law. So I ordered the Department of Defense to take necessary action to get more information, on the first hand, and to be prepared to recover the ship on the other. And of course it involved sending some marines from another base. Unfortunately, we had a helicopter accident. It was mechanical, not involving the enemy. But anyhow, we ended up with US forces seizing the ship and recovering the merchant marine sailors. Now, it was a decision that I had to make to make sure that the world knew we weren't gonna be kicked around. I couldn't help but remember the tragedy of the Pueblo incident, where about two years previous the North Koreans had seized and American Coast Guard ship and held it for, what, eighteen months. I was not gonna let that happen in this case. So I made the decision to involve our airforce, involve our marines, and we got the ship, as we as the crew back.

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HUGH SIDEY

Going on now, you're facing Jimmy Carter in the election of 1976. What went wrong?

GERALD FORD

Well, in the first place, Hugh, after our convention, we were thirty-four points behind. Jimmy Carter had an insurmountable lead, and I demanded we have debates. I challenged him to debates and we had three of them. The first one on domestic policy. I think I did well; was not expected to. Second on national security, foreign policy, military. I said something about Poland. In retrospect, I was one hundred percent right...

HUGH SIDEY

Just a little ahead of your time.

GERALD FORD

The last one in Williamsburg was about everything. I think we ran a good campaign because when we ended up on election day we lost by one percentage point.

HUGH SIDEY

Was it a case of just being burdened with too much? The scandal and all the things that preceded you?

00:43:03:00

GERALD FORD

I think you're right, Hugh. There were some who never forgave the Republicans for the war in Vietnam even though President John F. Kennedy had made the first combat commitment in Vietnam. There were people that never forgave me for pardoning Richard Nixon. There were people who didn't think our economic recovery was coming along quickly enough. But when you lose by about 10,000 votes, 6,000 in Ohio and 2 or 3,000 in Hawaii, the election could've change very dramatically with a minor shift in how the voters went.

HUGH SIDEY

How'd you feel? How'd you cope with that sense of loss?

GERALD FORD

Well I never like to lose anything.

[laughter]

GERALD FORD

I'm a competitive person, but on the other hand, again if I could reflect on athletics, I played on winning teams and losing teams. And when we lost a game, I never sat around and grouched about it. I always thought there's another game next week, and you ought to start preparing for the next ball

game. And in politics I lost the presidential election, but I had to start thinking about a new life. What I was going to do, what Betty and I and the family would have for our future. That's a much better attitude to have than to sit around and moan and groan about taking a beating. We did the best we could and darn near won... Against tough odds.

HUGH SIDEY

Mr. President, let's go back a little to your boyhood and your family and that. What really helped you in later life or being president? Family values? Boy scouts? Football? War? Yale? Maybe a little of all of those.

GERALD FORD

Well, Hugh, I was very very lucky. I had a wonderful mother, and I was equally blessed to have a superb step father. My mother divorced my real father when I was less than a year old. And when I was about a month old, she took me because my real father was abusing her physically and mentally, and took me by train from Omaha, where I was born, to Grand Rapids where her friend—her parents were. So I never knew that I was an adopted son until I was about 15. My step father was a magnificent person and my mother, equally wonderful.

00:46:09:00

GERALD FORD

So I was brought up in a very wonderful environment. I had three younger brothers from my mother's second marriage. Actually, my step father

probably treated me as well if not better than his own children. So, I couldn't have written a better prescription for a superb family upbringing.

HUGH SIDEY

You were an excellent football player. You got scholarships, of course, for it. Why didn't you become a professional?

GERALD FORD

Well I... In high school I was allstate, I was captain of the allstate team. I went to the University of Michigan. In those days you didn't have a scholarship, but our head football coach got me a job over at the university hospital where I waited on tables for the interns and cleaned up the meals in the nurses' cafeteria, for which I got paid fifty cents an hour and I worked four hours a day. With two dollars, in 1951, I could buy all the food I needed, and I rented a room for four dollars a week. And I had earned that money in my step father's paint company. We got no scholarship. About every three months I'd go over at the university hospital and give blood, for which I was paid twenty-five dollars for, or whatever a quarter. That cash came in very handy. So then I played at University of Michigan, and I played in the shrine east west game [East West Shrine Bowl] in San Francisco after I graduated, and the All Star game against the Chicago Bears in Chicago. And then I got a job coaching football at Yale as an assistant, and my pay was twenty-four hundred dollars a year, but single during the depression, that was adequate. Eventually, I worked up to earning thirty-six hundred dollars a year and going to law

school simultaneously.

00:48:27:00

GERALD FORD

So I had a full schedule of trying to be a coach where I was earning thirty-six hundred dollars a year, and going to one of the best, if not the best, law schools full time.

HUGH SIDEY

What did the war do to you?

GERALD FORD

It was a great experience. I graduated from law school, went back to Grand Rapids to practice law, had opened up our law firm of Ford and Buchen without a client. A year later the war came, I was single so I joined the Navy. I was very lucky again. I spent nine months in the Naval Air Training Command in North Carolina and I got bored. I applied for sea duty and I was signed to an aircraft carrier, which was a great assignment. We went out to the Pacific and I spent two and a half years in the Pacific War on a ship that was involved in all of Admiral Halsey and Admiral Michener's island hopping operations. It gave me a realization that you had to make a commitment to your country in a crisis. I'd never thought too much about going into the military as I grew up, but when Pearl Harbor happened, it made a difference. People were eager and anxious to get in whatever service they were involved in. I enjoyed the Navy. It was good training. I was in the middle of combat for two years. I had

good captains. I was the assistant navigator and I was the officer of the deck during combat. So I had great experience.

HUGH SIDEY

Back to the presidency now. What do you think is your greatest achievement as president?

GERALD FORD

I hope historians, a few years from now, will write that the Ford administration healed the land. That President Ford restored public confidence in the White House and in the government.

HUGH SIDEY

What was your greatest disappointment?

00:51:08:00

GERALD FORD

My greatest disappointment was that I couldn't turn a switch and all of a sudden overnight go from an economic recession to economic prosperity. That was the greatest disappointment domestically. The greatest disappointment internationally was that I was not elected so I could've consummate a nuclear weapons arms reduction with Mr. Brezhnev so that we could have significantly reduced the nuclear threshold in the Cold War.

HUGH SIDEY

There were two attempts, quote unquote, on your life while you were president. One, an actual shot. Another one apparently would have been a shot had they not discovered the woman with the gun. What did that do to you as a leader? Did that change your feelings about the presidency?

GERALD FORD

Well, the first one was in Sacramento and "Squeaky" Fromme, a member of the Manson gang, stuck her hand towards me as though she was going to shake hands and it ended up she had a gun in her hand. So her gun was about this far from my face when the secret service agent, Larry Buendorf, saw it and grabbed the gun and prevented her from pulling the trigger. That was pretty close. The second one was about a month later in San Francisco when Sara Jane Moore, as I came out of the St Francis Hotel, took a shot at me from across the street. She lost her aim because a maine standing next to her saw and hit her hand, and the shot missed me by three or four feet. Those were scary.

HUGH SIDNEY

How do you live with that?

00:53:06:00

GERALD FORD

Well once it's over, Hugh, you say well it's... nothing happened. So forget it and you just have to say that's one of the perils of the profession.

HUGH SIDEY

What about being president just generally? What would you change in the office? Is it satisfactory the way it's set up?

GERALD FORD

A person who's qualified, who has the right character, and the right motives can handle the job. We don't need to change the duties and the responsibilities. We have to make sure the person the American people elect has the qualifications that are essential for the circumstances that are presented to him as our Chief Executive.

HUGH SIDEY

Mr. President, on Bicentennial Day in 1976, July 4th, you toured from Washington up to Philadelphia. I don't know that I've ever seen a more joyous, sort of emotional, event. Tell me about that a little bit.

GERALD FORD

Well that was a bust busy day. We went up to where Washington crossed the Delaware, we went to Philadelphia, I made a speech in that historic building. Then we flew to New York where they had the tall ships in the New York harbor. It was a very emotional day and ended up on the balcony at the White House with one of those magnificent fireworks displays. One couldn't help but have joy and pride on the 200th anniversary of this great country.

HUGH SIDEY

You ever thought a boy from Grand Rapids would travel that route, huh?

GERALD FORD

I look back and wondered how it ever happened to me and I think it's a great country that something like that could happen to somebody with that background. And as we look at the lives of later presidents, many of them came from humble backgrounds. From Plains, Georgia and Hope, Arkansas.

HUGH SIDEY

You're still rather upbeat about the office and its ability to cope with the problems...

GERALD FORD

Hugh, I get very irritated with people who make a profession about bashing America. I detest the cynics, skeptics. In my lifetime, our country's got a pretty good track record. We overcame the depression of the 1930s, which was a terrible tragedy. We overcame the challenge of Hitler and our other adversaries in WWII and beat back aggression in WWI. We have overcome, since the end of WWII, 5 recessions. We ended up, a few years ago, winning the battle against communism and the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact nation. That's a good track record and we ought to be proud of it instead of being cynical and skeptical. America's a great country.

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You have to, to the extent that he was ... uh, he set the standards by which we basically judge our presidents, so George Washington is important historically.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Well, that was the hallmark of my, uh, presidency, we healed the wounds of Watergate and, uh, the resignation of President Nixon. Those were critical times in the history of the United

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States, and my presidency healed those, uh, problems, and that was similar to the problems that faced George Washington, uh, Abraham Lincoln, etcetera.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Abraham Lincoln is probably, in my judgment, a great, great president, he healed the differences following the Civil War. In my case, I had to heal the differences following Watergate and the resignation of President Nixon, so there's a ... a ... a remote similarity between what Lincoln did and what I did, uh, on becoming president.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

I don't think he betrayed the American people. He made a mistake in turning over, uh, many of the functions of his office to some of his staff, and those members of the staff misled him and betrayed him, and he in effect had to pay the penalty. Uh, I don't think that Nixon betrayed the American people, he made a mistake. Unfortunately, they were serious and they brought about, you know, eventually his ... his resignation.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Unfortunately, I was not fully informed at a time that it was important that we were trying to get the truth out. And the net result is, uh, Nixon had to pay the penalty and, to some extent, I had to face up to a very critical decision as to what I was going to do or what I was going to say.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Absolutely it is fundamental that, uh, an American president be truthful, honest, a person of integrity as far as the public is concerned. The public expects that character, that important ingredient in a person's, uh, character when he assumes the oath of office as President of the United States.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

In my inaugural comments, which were different than anybody else in the history of the country, I said truth is the basic ingredient that, uh, seals a relationship, a good relationship between the people and the president. I believed it then, and I believe it even more importantly today.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

The president is the representative of the people. He is selected in effect by the people, not, uh, technically, but in effect, uh, he is selected by the people. And because he is, he is therefore, uh, the president of the people, by the people, and for the people.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

It is very fundamental that a president feel an attachment to the people, the 200 million, 300 million, whatever it is. The president, to do a good job, has to have a closeness to the people. If he does, he can be more effective. If he, uh, doesn't have that relationship, that feeling, he can't really do his job in the White House.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

That's pure speculation. I ... I can't answer that categorically. The American people were upset, distressed, by what took place in Watergate and all the ramifications of it. Whether an apology would clean the slate is hard to tell. I have the feeling the public would understand, but we can only be speculating on, uh, whether that's true or untrue.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

He was unable to really face up to the comment that was necessary as an apology. He never did really apologize. Uh, he explained as he sought(?), but that was not an apology to the American people.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Jackson was a populist president. I came into office quite differently, and the net result, I had no public mandate, uh, to be president, so I had to start from scratch or zero to get the confidence and the backing of the American people. And, uh, it was important responsible to heal the wounds of Watergate, and to go from there to, uh, better times for the public, for the presidency.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Well, I made the very basic decision to pardon President Nixon, I believed it was the right thing to do at the time. I'm even more convinced today that it was the right thing. Nixon, uh, made mistakes, but overall ... particularly in foreign policy Nixon was a very able president of the United States. He made mistakes, he had people working for him who were undercutting him or

making mistakes, which he had to suffer for. So, uh, although Nixon, uh, resigned under a cloud, uh, it was important for me as his successor to, uh, be frank and honest, which was important. The pardon was the right thing to do, uh, I decided it myself. I had a lot of com ... adverse comments when I did, but in retrospect, it looks better and better.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

I sure did. I took a big hit for, uh, pardoning Nixon at the time. And on the other hand, I am pleased to see that many able columnists, journalists, uh, and others are now coming out and say I did the right thing. I was please for example, Bob Woodworth [sic], who was very critical at the time of the pardon, has now come forth and totally endorsed what I did.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

It's possible, because there was an element in our society that disliked Nixon so much, they never forgave me for granting the pardon, uh, on his behalf. But that was not the question of whether it was right or wrong. The question was, was it right to do the pardon, and I think it was then and is today.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

There's no question that, uh, in the long run it was the right thing for the American people that I pardon Ri ... Richard Nixon. It may not have been the most popular thing, but presidents don't necessarily judge rightness or wrong on the basis of popularity. You have to do in a crisis what you think is right, and, uh, hopefully the public will understand.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

That is absolutely correct, and I learned that early.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Uh, a responsible of a president is to lead the American people in times of crisis. I first learned that when I was an early Congressman. President Truman with his, uh, foreign policy decisions, the, uh, bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, the, uh, action that he took, uh, elsewhere in foreign policy, meeting the challenge of the North Koreans and going into South Korea, those were not popular decisions at a critical time in our history. But President Truman did the right thing, and history now shows his decisions to be correct. So, uh, all I can say with

emphasis, is that a president should act on the basis of what is right and wrong, not on the basis of temporary popularity.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Yes, it is a tricky balance between what is right for a president to do, and what the public thinks he ought to do in a popularity contest. In my case, I strongly believed that a president can do it right by being out in front, giving the public the facts, the information, uh ... uh, will give him the justification for his decision.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

You can't ignore FDR. President Roosevelt, FDR, uh, faced many problems in his three and a half terms as president, and he always seemed to not only do the right thing, but the popular thing, he was very skillful as a politician. So anyone who succeeds him at some later date has to, uh, review subjectively the problems faced by FDR, how he handled them, how he handled the public. Uh, he was a master at handling not only the problems, but the public.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Oh, I admired, uh ... uh, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, even though I had never voted for him, uh, couldn't vote the first time or two because I was under age. But, uh, I never supported him publicly, uh, although in retrospect I can say that I think he, uh, would rank as one of our good presidents.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Well, that's the uniqueness of our Democratic, Republican, uh, basic governance. The, uh, president, once he is elected, has the obligation to be a broadly effective chief executive, that's what he is for a period of four years or more. So, uh, a president has a very delicate balance. He has to get elected, because he's either a Democrat or a Republican, but once he's elected, he then has a broader responsibility. His responsibility then is to be the chief executive for the people of the United States.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Polling is interesting, but I don't think it should, uh, lead the way in where our country should go. Polling can be deceptive by the way questions are asked, how they're asked. Uh, it's interesting to see the result, but I think a president has ... can be a better

judge ... a better judge of, uh, what he should do, uh, by his own instincts, his own experience, his own background. And using those as a criteria, he can make the right decisions.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

I think it is very important for the president to be out seeing the people, mingling with the people. Uh, after I had two assassination attempts on my life, I ... I was urged to stay in the White House. I contradicted that advice, I thought it was important that I be out with the people, and the net result was, uh, we had no problems, and we did a better job of relations with the public.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

You can't be oblivious to, uh, polls that are taken and the results that are given to you as president. But I say very categorically, I made no decisions based on a poll, yes or no. Uh, I always felt I was a better judge of, uh, what was right or wrong in major decisions. So, uh, that was, uh, my, uh, criteria, judgement, experience, uh, background. Polls are interesting, but shouldn't be, uh, the criteria.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Well, the re ... relationship between the Executive, the Judicial and the Executive branch varies from time to time. We have three branches of our government, they're all independent, but they have to work together to make a ... our country, uh, what we want it to be. From time to time the Executive will dominate ... from time to time the Executive will dominate, and then the Judiciary. Uh, the Supreme Court has handled that balance very effectively and fairly. And as time passes, we see the variation in what branch should be the dominant and what shouldn't be. So, uh, as we look back historically, our three-pronged kind of government has worked pretty darn well, and I think it will in the future.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Yes, it's a system of checks and balances. And as long as we respect those checks and balances between the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary, uh, we'll do a good job in running this great country.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

I can't give you a categorical answer why Nixon had his problems, Clinton had his. They both made mistakes, and the net result was the American people represented in the Congress, uh, either did one thing or another. Uh, that is one of the strengths of our system. Uh, the House of Representatives is the people's house, it's the ground, uh, breaking part of our government that is the closest to the voting public generally. So what they did in the case of Nixon, or didn't do in the case of Clinton, or vice versa, uh, it relates to the ... the people's house taking the action they can or shouldn't.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Well, there's no question that members of the House at the time reflected the American people and their views. So what they did in the case of one and didn't do in the case of the other, is a reflection of what the public wanted them to do as their representative.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

I firmly believe that a president can be a better president if he is a people's president. Now, uh, you know, we've had some illustrations where, uh, individuals seem to contradict that situation, but in the long run the odds are a people's person will be elected over, uh, a paperwork president.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

I firmly believe, having served in both the Congress, the House, as well as in the, uh ... uh, White House ... I firmly believe that the presidency is a people's, uh, place for the chief executive. But when you get to the fundamental, the 435 members of the House of Representatives, uh, the closest in the long run to the people, uh, of the United States.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Yes, uh, members of the House are closer to the people than the Senate. Of course historically members of the Senate were appointed, uh, were not elected. They changed that for a good reason. But still the House with its two year term is closer with their more frequent elections, than the Senate with their six year term.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

I would not favor the, uh, abolishment of the Electoral College, and a direct election of the president. The Electoral College system has worked. We've ended up using that system, and we've had more good presidents than bad presidents, so why get rid of something that seems to have done the ... a good job.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Well, uh, I support the tough decisions that President Bush has made, and he's made some tough ones, Iraq, uh ... uh, deficits, etcetera. I ... I support what President Bush II has done, and I wish him the very, very best.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

I feel very strongly that the office of the presidency will be our signpost for the future, as it has been in the past.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

The forthcoming president, whenever that happens, it is important for him or her to, uh, use the, uh, experience that comes from the past in deciding what to do in the future.

QUESTION

GERALD FORD

Glad to do it.

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