

Gerald R. Ford Oral History Interview – 7/8/2003
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Biographical Note

Gerald Ford was the 38th President of the United States (1974-1977) and member of the Warren Commission investigating the assassination of President John F. Kennedy (1963). In the interview he discusses his relationship with President Kennedy, his involvement on the Warren Commission, and controversy surrounding the President's death among other issues.

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GERALD R. FORD

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Oral History Interview

with

GERALD R. FORD

July 8, 2003
Avon, Colorado

by Vicki Daitch

For the John F. Kennedy Library

DAITCH: This is Vicki Daitch. Today is July 8, 2003, and I'm interviewing President Gerald Ford at his home in Avon, Colorado. First of all, I just wanted to.... As you know, this is for the Kennedy library.

FORD: Right.

DAITCH: First of all, I just wanted to sort of.... I know you served in the House with John Kennedy for a brief while before he went into the Senate. Do you have any particular recollections about that time?

FORD: Well, I got to know Jack Kennedy when I first went to the House in January of 1949. He was elected two years ahead of me, and I was elected in 1948. By pure happenstance, they assigned newcomers suites in the Old House Office Building. And by pure happenstance, I was in one suite, and right across the hall, on the same corridor, he was in the other suite. So we became well acquainted over the two or four years that he served while I was there. We would walk back and forth from the Office Building to the floor of the House. Our staffs mingled. So it was a good relationship based

on just more or less coincidence.

DAITCH: Now, you were close to the same age, though, too, right? You were young men first going into politics.

FORD: We were within a year or two of each other.

DAITCH: So did that sort of create any kind of camaraderie that might have not been so much if you were further apart?

FORD: Oh, I think so. And we were both relatively the same age. I was 35 or 36; he was roughly the same age. We had both served in the military, in the Navy. Ideologically, we had many differences. But on a personal basis, we had a good friendship.

DAITCH: Now you were both ideologically fairly moderate for your parties, is that fair to say?

FORD: Well, I was an internationalist as a Republican. I was against the isolationists, I was against the hard-line right wing. And if my recollection is correct, Jack Kennedy's views within the Democratic party were of the middle of the road.

DAITCH: Mmmm hmmm. Right. Now, how did you maintain your friendship after you moved to the Senate?

FORD: Well, we were separated with a different relationship. He was in the Senate; I was in the House. But we would run into each other at social events or other gatherings. It wasn't as frequent or as warm a friendship, but it was still a good relationship.

DAITCH: Right. Now, you were friendly--at that time were you also friendly with Nixon [Richard M. Nixon]?

FORD: Oh, yes. From my first day that I was in the House, after I was sworn in, Nixon came up to me, and he said, "I'm Dick Nixon from California. I'm glad to see you." Well, he and Kennedy had come in two years ahead of me. Right from the beginning, I had a very warm personal relationship with Dick Nixon. He went from the House to the Senate and to the vice presidency.

DAITCH: Right. Now, when he was vice president running against Kennedy, how was that? I mean obviously you would have supported Vice President Nixon. What was your sense of the election and their...?

FORD: Obviously I supported Nixon, but it wasn't a personal difference. It was ideological. I supported Nixon, and I did what I could to defeat Kennedy. But when Kennedy won in '60, very close race, I was reelected in the House. And on international matters, I supported the Kennedy administration. I had differences with them, ideologically, domestically.

DAITCH: Now, I know that the Kennedys felt, in particular by 1963, I guess people were gearing up for the '64 election, they were feeling pretty frustrated. We have some evidence in the library, you know, of conversations where they felt that partisan politics were preventing them from getting any domestic legislation, the progressive things that they were interested in in terms of health care and civil rights and that sort of thing. Do you remember, sort of, maybe having a little more friction around that time with the administration?

FORD: There is no doubt that on domestic issues I strongly differed with the Kennedy administration. I don't recall the particulars. That's a long time ago. But ideologically we just had different views. Now, on international matters, NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], economic aid, military assistance for European nations, I was strongly in favor.

DAITCH: Were you surprised that Kennedy turned out to be so much of an internationalist, knowing that his father [Joseph P. Kennedy, Sr.] had been such an isolationist?

FORD: I understood it because Jack Kennedy came from a different era. His father was anti-British, anti-internationalism because he came from one generation. Jack came from a totally different era, different generation. So I understood it.

DAITCH: It probably seemed to be common sense to you at the time.

FORD: Well, I believed in it myself, and I was pleased to see that Kennedy, as a Democrat, had similar views.

DAITCH: Right, right. I know that they were very frustrated about the civil rights. Obviously at the time there was so much conflict, in fact some really violent things that were going on. The Kennedys were criticized for not moving fast enough, and they were criticized for doing some of the things that they did. What was your take at the time [on] what they should have been doing?

FORD: Well, it's interesting. Johnson [Lyndon B. Johnson], who came later, was very much more aggressive on civil rights than Kennedy was. Johnson really moved

forward vigorously on civil rights. And I think it was a contrast with the sort of hesitancy on the part of the Kennedys that upset the civil rights movement, etc.

DAITCH: The Kennedys claim that they couldn't get anything through Congress, and that's why they were hesitant: because Congress was so antithetical to the things that they were trying to do. Do you think that's a...?

FORD: There's no doubt that the Kennedy administration was not as skillful in dealing with the Congress as they should have been. It was even more evident when Johnson took over. He was a master of dealing with the Congress and that just reflected adversely on the inability of the Kennedys to work and get results with the Congress.

DAITCH: Right. I've heard people say, historians have said and other people, that they should have maybe used Vice President Johnson more in that capacity because he was such a master at it. Asked him to help more on things.

FORD: I always felt the Kennedy administration per se was hesitant, reluctant to deal with the Johnson wing of the Democratic party. There was a jealousy or whatever you want to call it. The Kennedys weren't going to do something to get Johnson to help them because then it would be a Johnson action rather than a Kennedy action. Human nature being what it is, the Kennedy people were reluctant.

DAITCH: Right. That's maybe understandable, as you say, from a human nature perspective.

FORD: I understood it. It was too bad. Human jealousy shouldn't interfere with desirable action, but that being what it is....

DAITCH: I wanted to go back to.... You were part of sort of a progressive group in the House in the early sixties, and I think about that--for me the context was instantly--I think about Kennedy being a young person who's doing and maybe saying the same kinds of things about let's get the country moving again, let's be vigorous. Was that sort of...? Were those similar impulses in both parties?

FORD: There were elements in both parties. The Democratic party had a heritage, particularly with the dominance of the Southern Democrats, to be very aggressive, to move out of the old mold. The Republicans, because of their defeat in '60, realized they had to do something to change their image. But the Southern Democrats were a roadblock to any real affirmative action on the part of the Democratic administration. It's interesting. When I went to Congress, there wasn't a single Republican below the Mason-Dixon Line.

DAITCH: Is that right?!

FORD: Not one. And now look at how the political geography has changed.

DAITCH: Yes, absolutely. It's really fascinating, and it's all about civil rights, isn't it?

FORD: That's right.

DAITCH: Absolutely. To me the sixties are such an interesting period because of the way the politics completely flip-flopped. It must have been difficult to--especially right at that moment when Kennedy was president and Johnson, too, I think. I mean what a difficult time to try to move forward on anything domestically.

FORD: It was difficult because the Democratic party was not unified, and the Republican party had its own splits: from the hard right to the moderates like myself. So it was a transitional period in American politics.

DAITCH: Right. I know you supported President Kennedy's internationalist policies. How about the.... I mean the things that now you look back and you say what a terrible mistake the Bay of Pigs and some other things. But on the other hand, you know, the Cuban Missile Crisis, especially with the papers and the tapes that have been made available now, it appears as if Kennedy really handled it masterfully in terms of avoiding nuclear war. It was a very scary moment. Do you, I mean looking back on it now and at the time, comparing, did you believe that he was handling it well?

FORD: I was somewhat in the center of what was happening. I had no control or jurisdiction. But I was a senior Republican on the Defense Appropriations Committee.

DAITCH: Oh, so you would have been kept aware.

FORD: So I was kept fully informed as to what was taking place. I had no jurisdiction over action. But I was informed on a daily basis by the top people in the Pentagon because I was on the committee that provided all the money for the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. So I saw firsthand how skillfully the administration under Kennedy handled the matter.

DAITCH: You were impressed with it at the time?

FORD: Very much so.

DAITCH: Did you have any sense of.... I mean if you look at, listen to, or read the transcriptions of some of the tapes, the discussions that took place in the ExComm, it's amazing how strongly and skillfully mostly Kennedy alone and a handful of other people, but there was a lot of pressure to act more aggressively. And I can't help but be struck by, for a young man who has considerable experience and is a man of some sophistication, but nevertheless how strongly he resisted doing anything too forceful or too likely to force Khrushchev [Nikita S. Khrushchev] into reacting himself.

FORD: That's a tribute, I think, to his good judgment. But I'll add this as a postscript: I firmly believe that a president is a better president if he's served in the military. There's something about serving in the military that gives you a broader perspective, regardless of what your role is. But having served in the military.... I spent four years in the Navy, Kennedy spent a long time, I don't remember how much. But your judgment is tempered by your exposure to the military. And I think it makes you a better president.

DAITCH: That's interesting. I would tend to agree with that. On the other hand--in terms of having a broader view maybe or being even resistant to going to war--on the other hand some of the people who were pressuring him to go to war were military people.

FORD: Well, it's a matter of individual exposure, what you think is right or wrong. I think the Kennedy final decisions were very sound in the Cuban Missile Crisis.

DAITCH: What about their other--and this will sort of lead us into the Warren Commission, which is very important for the library to understand. But what about the administration's policies were sort of, I don't know what the right word is, you know, the secrecy, the sort of aggressive pursuit of trying to undermine Castro's [Fidel Castro] regime, and, ultimately, we found out later, the assassination attempts. Were you aware of any of that at the time?

FORD: My recollection.... It's a good many years ago. I'm not accurate on that, so I don't really recall. I will say that this: Although we as Republicans thought Kennedy's popularity following the election of '60 would make him automatically reelected in '64, by '63 there was a growing anti-Kennedy political view. By '63, before he was assassinated, there was a feeling among Republicans we had a chance to beat him '64. Now maybe we were overly optimistic. But it was a different environment from '62 and '61.

DAITCH: Do you think because people.... There were a lot of areas in.... People look back now and sort of idealize the period, but there were a lot of areas in which he was struggling.

FORD: Vulnerable.

DAITCH: Yes, and not making a lot of progress. So by that time it was evident that there weren't any big things to show for the....

FORD: Right. So maybe we were overly optimistic. But at least the atmosphere was different.

DAITCH: Well, that's interesting because that goes back to what I had seen in some of the documents at the library, where they felt that they were sort of under attack. And probably the Republicans felt that they could be a little more aggressive. Let's talk about the assassination for a moment. I mean everybody.... The question is always, where were you, etc.? But what was that for you?

FORD: You know, I'm the sole, surviving member of that seven-member board.

DAITCH: Yes.

FORD: Well, the day of the assassination Mrs. Ford [Elizabeth Anne "Betty" Bloomer Ford] and I had gone into the District of Columbia to talk to an education counselor for one of our sons. As we came out of the meeting with the counselor, we turned the radio on. And that's how I heard about the assassination. I was shocked because of my personal friendship. I was shocked because I couldn't believe somebody would assassinate an American president. And Mrs. Ford and I went to the funeral, etc.

I think it was Sunday night. The assassination had occurred on Friday, as I recall. Sunday night Mrs. Ford and I were sitting in our home in Alexandria, and I got a telephone call from President Johnson saying he was setting up this blue-ribbon group to investigate the assassination and wanted me to serve on it. I said, "Mr. President, I have major responsibilities in the House. I don't have time." And a typical Johnson technique, he twisted your arm, and I agreed. And that's how I got on the board with Hale Boggs [Thomas Hale Boggs], the chief justice [Earl Warren], Allen Dulles [Allen W. Dulles], John McCloy [John J. McCloy], two senators: from Kentucky [John Sherman Cooper] and Georgia [Richard B. Russell].

DAITCH: It was, in fact, a blue-ribbon panel.

FORD: Well, it was a very able panel, I'll say that.

DAITCH: So how did you work together, the panel? I mean I remember seeing some criticism or another that while the panel members weren't always there.... But

you all had other responsibilities that you had to continue to....

FORD: I was probably one of the most conscientious in attending. Some of the others missed quite a bit. But they always had a top staff person present who could fill in for the absent member. But over all, I think our participation was good.

DAITCH: In terms of gathering the information, I assume there were staff people to gather the information and take depositions and that sort of thing?

FORD: Well, we hired as a group of I think six or seven top lawyers from all over the country. Arlen Specter was one of them.

DAITCH: Is that right!

FORD: He was a highly-thought-of lawyer of the Philadelphia area. He was one of the top lawyers we hired. They did a lot of the preliminary investigation. They as a group came up with a proposed draft of the Commission report. In that report they said, the staff in what they drafted, that there was no conspiracy, foreign or domestic. The Commission independently changed it. We said, as a Commission, we found *no evidence of a conspiracy*, foreign or domestic. Which is quite different.

DAITCH: Absolutely.

FORD: Now, the truth is there's been no evidence to change it. But we had to be a little more cautious.

DAITCH: Sure. Absolutely. Now did the Commission itself, did you get together, did you discuss the evidence and the papers that the staff people had drafted and that sort of thing?

FORD: Oh, yes. That's why we made the change about evidence of a conspiracy. We made two basic decisions: Lee Harvey Oswald committed the assassination. We were convinced of that. And we as a Commission stated that we found no evidence of a conspiracy, foreign or domestic.

DAITCH: Now, I have heard this sort of as, maybe it's intended a little bit as a criticism of the Commission, but more just as context for what the Commission was working with. But I have read in a couple of different places now that President Johnson wanted, and so did Bob Kennedy [Robert F. Kennedy] and some other people, wanted the Commission to be able to say this is not a conspiracy, this is not a KGB [Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti] plot, this is not a Castro plot. Was there pressure to sort of come up with that conclusion?

FORD: No pressure on me. So I'm not a good witness on that. There may have been pressure on the chief justice or other members. But from my point of view, it was not pressure to come to any conclusion one way or another.

DAITCH: Right. It's, apparently they feared that there would be a movement in the country to do something if people thought it was a KGB plot or something like that. But, in fact, there really was no evidence to that effect.

FORD: None that I saw. But we had a very able staff who did a good job interrogating witnesses, Marina [Marina N. Prusakova Oswald], the wife and the mother [Marguerite Oswald]. They were very odd.

DAITCH: Yes. Which sort of explains a little bit about Oswald, I suppose.

FORD: Right, right.

DAITCH: Did you actually talk to any of these people? Or were you present?

FORD: Oh, I was present and interrogated all of the lead witnesses: Marina, the mother, and so forth.

DAITCH: Right. And what was your impression of Marina, for example?

FORD: Well, the mother was kookie.

DAITCH: Really?

FORD: You can understand why the son was odd. The wife, who was a Russian--Oswald married her in the Soviet Union. She was surprisingly able. I have a feeling, and I think others shared it, that he, Oswald, assassinated Kennedy because he was being prodded by his wife...

DAITCH: Really!?

FORD: ...on his impotence and so forth, and he had to do something to display his bravado. Now, that's a theory.

DAITCH: That's interesting. Did you think that she was prodding him specifically toward that kind of act or that was just his way of...?

FORD: That was his action. I don't think she suggested that particular action.

DAITCH: One of the criticisms of the Warren Commission.... I think in recent years historians have sort of tried to take a more serious look at the Commission rather than the usual conspiracy, the kookie thing. But one of the criticisms has been that the Commission didn't do enough. In fact, I think one of the staff members said that he felt that one of the weaknesses of the report, I can't remember which one, was that Oswald's motive was never really clarified enough for the American people to really get their mind around it and feel comfortable about why he did it.

FORD: I don't recall a staff member raising that question. What I told you a few minutes ago, that's my own judgment. Now, I think it may well have been shared by others on the Commission. But we never wrote it in the report, to my knowledge.

DAITCH: Yes, the person's name was Burt Griffin [Burt W. Griffin]. I don't know if that rings a bell.

FORD: Oh, he was one of the top lawyers we hired, along with Arlen Specter. Yes, I've forgotten where he came from, but he was one of the top lawyers that we drafted to come and help us.

DAITCH: I wonder if a little bit of this.... It's very easy to say those things in retrospect in terms of at the time it seemed like the motivation was fairly complete, and part of it is in fact that the man was unstable and that sort of thing. But to put it in the political context of our government's pursuit of Castro and attempted assassinations, which some of these people--apparently Castro knew about them, and he made mention of them so the pro-Castro community in the United States was aware of them.

FORD: Well, I just don't have that recollection 40-some years later. I had my own views that I recollect. Some of the others I wouldn't be able to testify.

DAITCH: Right. Now you knew at the time, though, that Oswald had been sort of hanging around with these pro-Castro organizations, and he had gone to Mexico to try to...

FORD: New Orleans. He had been to the Castro embassy in Mexico. We were all familiar with that, yes.

DAITCH: But you didn't find any real connection with...

FORD: I didn't see it, no.

DAITCH: Right. I don't think anyone still has come up with that, but at the time. Now obviously you were one of the main people who was the driving force behind some of the groups in the 1970's, in Congress--the committees and the commissions--to bring some of these secretive CIA activities more to light and to make the government more accountable for those things.

FORD: Right.

DAITCH: And that's one of the moments in history when people started to, again, aside from the conspiracy kooks, when people started to say, well, why didn't the Warren Commission uncover this? Because people.... I mean certainly Allen Dulles would have been aware probably.

FORD: He certainly should have because of his previous responsibilities.

DAITCH: Right. And maybe John McCloy.

FORD: Possibly.

DAITCH: Possibly. Who else? I think Dick Russell maybe might have known.

FORD: He could have.

DAITCH: But in any case, that some of the members of the Warren Commission probably would have known that there were these secret attacks against, and a fairly aggressive program of attack, against Castro, and that the Commission didn't try to put Oswald's acts in the context of that. Do you think that's a valid criticism?

FORD: It probably is as a Monday morning quarterback. At the time we thought we did a thorough job. Whether we slipped up on this particular aspect, history can only come up to its own conclusion. But, I think at the time a majority of the members of the Commission thought we had done a thorough job.

DAITCH: Right. Now what we also know is that the CIA and the FBI did not release to the Commission certain....

FORD: Correct. Which was unconscionable.

DAITCH: Right. I guess Richard Helms testified, he was the person who was...

FORD: In charge of the CIA.

DAITCH: Right. And he's testified that, well, even if we had released that material, it wouldn't have changed the conclusions. Which is probably true.

FORD: I think that's a fair assessment.

DAITCH: Given that, do you think that that was a decision that the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] had the authority to make in terms of not releasing that information to the Commission?

FORD: I think they made a mistake in not giving us all of the data they had available. And their judgment was not good in not giving us the full story.

DAITCH: Right, right. But you don't think that it would have changed anything?

FORD: From what I know about the additional evidence, I don't think it would have changed our basic decisions.

DAITCH: I have to tell you that the things that are available now are wonderful as a result of those commissions and as a result of the more recent...

FORD: I'm sure there's data now that we wish we had but never got. Not that they would have changed the two conclusions. But it would have been a more interesting scenario.

DAITCH: Mmmm hmmm. I think the context is one of the things that, you know, historians now are--in particular Max Holland has said, and I think there's something to be said for this, he puts the whole thing in the context of the Cold War. And that's very important from a historical perspective to understand the seriousness with which all of that was taken and the importance of I guess what you would call espionage and intelligence activities. And the fact that our government was withholding secrets from other branches of our government was maybe....

FORD: Well, history of government is that departments are not always forthright with their competitors in their government. That's human nature. Whether it's right or wrong, that's the way it works.

DAITCH: And if you can get by with it....

FORD: Right.

DAITCH: It's, I think, a very important point historically to understand at that time the

context.

FORD: Let me ask you this: You are much more knowledgeable in certain areas than we as a commission were because of new evidence. My impression, without getting into the details, is that none of the new evidence would basically change our two conclusions.

DAITCH: No, I don't think it does at all. And I think serious historians don't find that it does either. The biggest thing I think that historians want to add is the context of the.... There's a historian who has written--a journalist, I think, who's written a historical book. His name is Gus Russo. It's called *Live by the Sword*. His thesis, it seemed a little harsh to me, but basically his thesis is that, look, the Kennedy brothers, especially Bob Kennedy, were pursuing Castro very aggressively, and that that was common knowledge in the pro-Castro community...

FORD: Right.

DAITCH: And that that is the political context in which Lee Harvey Oswald acted. He figured, hey, if the American government is pursuing Castro, trying to assassinate him, then it's perfectly legitimate for me to turn around and try to assassinate the American president.

FORD: That's a theory. There's no concrete evidence that that would have transpired any differently. Now, whenever I'm asked what are my current conclusions, I have a one-page statement that I have typed up, made available. People send me a copy of the Warren Commission. On my views I have this one-page statement that says: "As the sole surviving member of the Warren Commission, I agree with the basic decisions that Lee Harvey Oswald committed the assassination, and we found no evidence of a conspiracy." I sign it, date it, and send it back. I won't get into an argument with people who have a different viewpoint.

DAITCH: Right. And again, I think that legitimate historians tend to agree with that perspective. I think this fellow Gus Russo has done a tremendous amount of research. And again, there's no question that there was this secret aggression toward the Castro regime.

FORD: Right.

DAITCH: That's a matter of historical fact. But he suggests that one of the reasons why Bob Kennedy also didn't want to pursue it much further, he wasn't aggressive.... Actually, let me ask you that: Did you find that Bob Kennedy wasn't terribly – [he] didn't want to spend a lot of time talking about it?

FORD: Hi, dear. [BREAK] ...as a zealot on a number of things than Jack was. His handling of the McCarthy [Joseph R. McCarthy] hearings. He was a tiger. Jack was more of a diplomat. So I would say that Bobby would have maybe even different.... Wendy [the dog], you go away and leave us.

DAITCH: Oh, I can't help petting a dog if there's one around.

FORD: Well, I've kind of lost the question.

DAITCH: The question was you knew both Bob and Jack Kennedy. And this fellow Russo has argued that one of the reasons that Bob Kennedy didn't pursue it more, the assassination investigation, was that he felt guilty for pushing the assassination attempts....

FORD: On Castro. That's possible. In comparing Jack and Bobby, as I said a moment ago, Jack was a diplomat, Bobby was a tiger. And Teddy [Edward M. Kennedy] is sort of in between.

DAITCH: I think of him more of the sort of master congressperson moving things through Congress.

FORD: Right. He's more of a legislator.

DAITCH: Legislator, yes. I think that it's an interesting proposition, and I don't know whether--you were there, and you knew Bob Kennedy, if you sort of had the sense that he wasn't pushing the investigation, or any sense of....

FORD: I didn't have the feeling that in the Commission there was any Bobby Kennedy influence. Maybe I didn't.... I know he never contacted me, to my knowledge or recollection. That's just a difference in the family.

DAITCH: Yes. It's an amazing family. I've also heard about Bob Kennedy that he, after the assassination, and I'm sure it wasn't an overnight thing, but that he.... I mean you spoke about him being such a tiger and he was a very aggressive person in a lot of ways during that period. But then afterward there's sort of a softer side, if you will, that came out. Do you remember seeing that or feeling that?

FORD: Not particularly, no. I never was close to Bobby. I was much closer to Jack. And I would be even more close to Ted because of our long friendship. I've got real admiration for Ted. He and Caroline [Caroline Lee Kennedy Schlossberg]

gave me the award up in Boston just a year or so ago which I was deeply grateful for, considering the previous attitude in reference to the pardon of Nixon. Profile in Courage from the two Kennedys was a wonderful admission that I was right and, in retrospect, they were wrong.

DAITCH: Sure. Absolutely.

FORD: And I appreciated it.

DAITCH: Oh, yes. I think it was one of those things.... I don't know them personally. But from the perspective of being around the Library, I think that people, you know, uniformly there believe that it was the right thing to do, you know, and that it was an act of courage to do it at the time.

FORD: Not wise politically.

DAITCH: No, not so much. But very much in the spirit of what the award is about, I think. Just for the tape we'll say we're talking about the Profiles in Courage Award by Caroline Kennedy and Senator Kennedy.

FORD: You haven't asked me anything about Jack Ruby.

DAITCH: Yes. Tell me about what you knew about Jack Ruby at the time.

FORD: I never knew anything about him prior to being on the Commission. But on the Sunday, the chief justice and I, with two or three staff people, flew to Dallas to spend about five hours interrogating Jack Ruby.

DAITCH: You did! I didn't know that.

FORD: We went to.... He was in the custody of the sheriff or whoever was controlling him. Our group with the chief justice interrogated him. He was unstable, to put it mildly. The critical question was: Why did you assassinate Oswald? And his consistent answer--he was asked many times--his consistent answer was: He didn't want to force Mrs. Kennedy to testify in a criminal trial against Oswald.

DAITCH: Really!

FORD: Strange point of view. But he demanded that he be given a lie detector test, which we finally agreed to. [CHANGE TO SIDE B OF TAPE] ...how he happened to be at the right time to do what he did. For example, the postal service had an inspector who was one of those who interrogated Ruby. You say, well, why

was a postal inspector involved? Well, the Post Office Department had some jurisdiction that got him involved.

This postal inspector on that Sunday that Ruby shot Oswald was at church. He called and said to the people holding Ruby, would they hold up until he got there to further interrogate him. And that delay made it possible that Oswald and Ruby happened to be there at the right time. So it wasn't a planned assassination of Oswald. It was pure happenstance.

DAITCH: Is that right! See, I'm not an assassination expert. I don't know that much about the assassination itself, as you can probably tell. But I'm fascinated with this response of that he didn't want Mrs. Kennedy to have to testify against Oswald. And if it's not a planned thing, at least he showed up with a gun. So he had some idea of....

FORD: What he was going to do.

DAITCH: Yes.

FORD: Well, he had a reputation of being involved with the Mafia and bad elements in the Dallas area.

DAITCH: Right. So he might have carried a gun all the time, you're thinking?

FORD: Right.

DAITCH: Yes. So he did elaborate on this concept of not wanting Mrs. Kennedy to testify?

FORD: I don't recall. But there was no question. That was his justification.

DAITCH: That is weird. Now, is there any evidence that he knew Mrs. Kennedy at all?

FORD: Not that I recall.

DAITCH: That is very weird.

FORD: He was a very odd character in the Dallas community.

DAITCH: Yes, yes, I knew that about him. His connections with the Mafia and all that, obviously that's one of the big theories. Did the Warren Commission actually investigate? Do you think that there was much time spent investigating the theory of having some Mafia, of Oswald also having Mafia connections?

FORD: I don't recall that as a member. But I'm sure our staff looked into that area.

DAITCH: Right. And really found nothing.

FORD: Not that we thought was a direct connection.

DAITCH: Right. Now what about the Clay [Clay L. Shaw] Trial and all that that occurred a little bit later? You must have been following that with some interest.

FORD: Well, that was in New Orleans, as I recall. He was a publicity hound, local district attorney [Jim C. Garrison], who made very serious charges but couldn't substantiate any of them. I don't recall the details, but he was a self-seeking, self-promoter.

DAITCH: As a Commission member, you didn't see anything about any of that that you thought, oh, my, we should have looked into this?

FORD: Again, I'm sure the staff did. But I don't recall we as a Commission spending a lot of time on it.

DAITCH: Right. Are there things that, you know, in subsequent years, over time, different things come out and this and that. But from today's perspective, are there things that you look back and you say, well, I wish we had pushed harder on this aspect of the investigation?

FORD: I think anytime you're in a capacity as a commission, you do a nine-month job under some pressure to get a conclusion. In retrospect, you can always say, well, I wish we had looked a little deeper into this. But then you evaluate, did we come up with the right answer? And again, I repeat, I think our conclusions were basically right. And I've seen no subsequent evidence, contrary to Oliver Stone and his movie, which was not a documentary. It was far from it. But he raised a lot of questions that the public wants some new answers to.

DAITCH: Right, right. I think those answers are going to be forthcoming in terms of the review board has released....

FORD: The Congressional board really hasn't come up with any new evidence.

DAITCH: Oh, no, no, not at all. But just new answers to the same old questions: The documents are there. You know, they answer some more questions. It still doesn't change anything.

FORD: Right.

DAITCH: But, you know, for people who want to dig.... And that's a good thing.

FORD: I always say there are still people who raise questions about Lincoln's [Abraham Lincoln] assassination. So from now until eternity we'll have questions raised about the Kennedy assassination.

DAITCH: Sure. Well, I do think it's such a shocking thing, it's such a horrifying moment in time, and such a frightening thing for the nation. And even in particular at that moment in national history. There was a very real threat of nuclear war.

FORD: Of course when I was president, I had two assassination attempts. Squeaky Fromme [Lynette Fromme], who was part of the Manson [Charles M. Manson] Gang in Sacramento, and Sara Jane Moore in San Francisco. I never understood why they wanted to assassinate me, but they sure tried.

DAITCH: Yes, yes. But again, that sort of suggests.... I'm thinking back to the question about motive in terms of the people who have said that, well, maybe the Commission should have come up with a more clear-cut motive for Oswald. Maybe there isn't always.

FORD: Well, all we could go by was what he told us. And he consistently took that point of view as murdering Oswald. I don't think there was ever any definitive motive that the Commission could land on about Oswald assassinating Kennedy. I have my feeling; I've expressed it. And others may have agreed or differed. But I don't think the Commission ever came up with a conclusion as to the motive.

DAITCH: I have a question for you that's a little different. But from the perspective of a former president, there have been various biographers and other types of historians have had these two views of Kennedy: On the one hand he certainly knew that his brother and the CIA were aggressively pursuing Castro up to the point of assassination. On the other hand, probably the most recent biographer of Kennedy has said that Kennedy knew that the idea had been kicked around, but that he was not really in favor of it, and that he had said that he thought it was a bad idea. From the point of view of having been president, do you think that it's possible that he didn't know that they were really aggressively pursuing Castro?

FORD: Because of his relationship with his brother, who was his attorney general, and because a president ought to know those things, I have to assume he did. I have no categorical evidence. But as president and particularly with his brother as attorney general, I have to assume he knew.

DAITCH: I mean I understand that once in a while there are and have been these occasional sort of rogue people in the CIA or FBI or whatever. But this seems to have been a pretty formalized program.

FORD: I wouldn't doubt that a bit, although I don't know for sure.

DAITCH: The newer evidence is suggesting that it was at that time being established that it was pretty heavily pursued. I know that that's just your opinion, but I wanted to ask you that because I think it is a historical question. And to the extent that some people want to say that it was sort of John Kennedy's own fault that he was assassinated because he was trying to assassinate Castro.

FORD: Castro. Well, you can't guarantee that sequence. You can't help but believe it's a possibility. But I don't have any concrete evidence. There are a number of books that support the Commission. In my office back in California I must have three or four books by respectable authors supporting the Commission. I've forgotten the titles and the names. But we have some support in the editorial area.

DAITCH: Well, I'm a historian myself, and I think that by far the view among real historians is that the Commission did a good job and came to the right conclusions.

FORD: Mark Lane was a self-seeker. Oliver Stone came up with a good movie, but a lousy documentary.

DAITCH: No history really.

FORD: Right.

DAITCH: But do you think that some of this comes from, I don't know how to put it, other than sort of a psychic desire among the American people for some kind of closure or some explanation for such a seemingly random or inexplicable act? You know, why did he do that, and how could that happen?

FORD: I'm not sure I understand the question.

DAITCH: I guess what I'm asking is why do you think that people do continue to pursue this and continue to want more explanations?

FORD: Well, there's a human nature fascination with conspiracies. This is an ideal area for the reasons you know very well: That the public just, as I said a

moment ago, people are still talking about the Lincoln assassination. Did Booth [John Wilkes Booth] do it? And if so, why? And so forth. So I don't think the public question is going to go away. It's probably going to continue and fester and fester forever.

DAITCH: Yes, because even if you accept that Oswald did it, the question of why is....

FORD: Another issue.

DAITCH: Yes, it is sort of inexplicable. I have another.... This is unrelated and kind of an oddball question.

FORD: Go ahead.

DAITCH: I read this in, again, one of the biographies. A biographer of Kennedy has said that Kennedy.... As you know, all the news about Kennedy's physical ailments, which were kind of suspected at the time maybe, but people didn't realize how extensive his medical problems were; but that apparently one of his physician's offices, there was an attempt to break into it. So this biographer has suggested, sort of slyly, I thought, that perhaps--and this was during the 1960 presidential campaign--that maybe Vice President Nixon had something to do with the attempted break-in on Kennedy's physician's office because he was looking for dirt.

FORD: I've never heard that before.

DAITCH: Have you not?

FORD: Never heard that. I can't imagine Nixon authorizing that. But I've never felt very friendly to Ehrlichman [John D. Ehrlichman] and Haldeman [H. R. Haldeman], and their operations in the Nixon administration were somewhat questionable. So it's possible. But I don't know that as a fact.

DAITCH: Right. I wondered whether.... I mean I knew that you had been friendly with Nixon from way back. But I wondered if you had thought that he had changed or if that would have been something that he might have considered at the time.

FORD: Well, I knew Nixon very well. My wife and I knew Pat [Thelma Catherine "Pat" Ryan Nixon] and Dick over many years. Nixon always in my presence acted responsibly. Now, some of the things I've learned from tapes, I don't like. But I think that's a reflection of Haldeman and Ehrlichman, to be honest with you.

DAITCH: Sort of an influence.

FORD: As chiefs of staff, etc.

DAITCH: Here's another, and again, this is unrelated. I'm sorry to sort of...

FORD: No, that's all right. Go ahead.

DAITCH: ...dash around, but some of these things I... I'm asking you for opinions because obviously you have so much experience in these issues yourself and in these events. This is a what-if question about Kennedy that people have been wondering about ever since the assassination. It's the Vietnam question. You know, so many people have argued, well, Kennedy, would have never gotten us mired into that. And other people have said, look, he's the one who had sent more advisors over there to begin with. You knew him, and you knew his policies, and you knew his international policies in particular.

FORD: Well, from my recollection, it was the Kennedy administration that sent our first combat forces to Vietnam. As I recollect, they sent 5,000 combat troops, 1962. Of course, Johnson accelerated that commitment many times. [BREAK] Johnson certainly added to our commitment in Vietnam. Whether Kennedy would have done the same, I can't tell you because all he did was make our initial combat commitment. You can argue one way or another. But the only evidence I know is that the first 5,000 were a commitment by the Kennedy administration.

DAITCH: Right. People have argued, again, both ways. One of the arguments is that Kennedy didn't have anything to prove. He had already sort of backed down Khrushchev in the Cuban Missile Crisis, and that he wouldn't have wanted to escalate. Again, maybe suggesting sort of the same thing you were talking about of having had military experience that he might not want to get too involved.

FORD: That's all speculation, and I wouldn't pass judgment on that.

DAITCH: It's a difficult question. It's just something that so many people have been trying to work out for so many years.

FORD: Well, the pro-Kennedy people would argue he would not have gotten mired in Vietnam. The truth is he made the first military combat commitment.

DAITCH: That's right.

FORD: Now whether that indicates anything to a major expansion or not is a question; you just don't know.

DAITCH: Exactly. Well, I should let you go here because obviously your time is valuable.

FORD: Well, I've enjoyed it. Can we have a transcript of this for my library?

DAITCH: Oh, absolutely. Yes.

FORD: I mean we won't use it. We'll just have it for the archives.

DAITCH: Oh, sure. What will happen is.... Well, I can turn these off now. But we can....

[END OF INTERVIEW - JFK #1, 7/8/2003]

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